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## Auditorium X

**Abstract:** *For weeks, a young acting student has been struggling unsuccessfully with a monologue from Schiller's The Maid of Orleans. Everyone is wondering whether to end rehearsals. It seems only a question of time. But then, unexpectedly, a change occurs. She finally begins to play the role well. It is a pleasure to watch. And then, just as things are looking good, there is a second shift. The student breaks into tears and no longer wants to act. What has happened?*

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## Double stalemate

Hannah J., a drama student, is struggling with one of the long monologues in Friedrich Schiller's romantic tragedy, *The Maid of Orleans*. There is no way to sweeten the experience. The rehearsal is grueling for everyone involved, and not for the first time. Each attempt at the play is polished and conventional. It is full of clichés, caught up in itself, locked into itself. Working on the play is like running a treadmill; it is not going anywhere. A stalemate. A bane.

Admittedly, the text is difficult, awkward. The language and the piece itself have an unfamiliar feel. They raise more than one aesthetic and thematic question. Nowadays, other theatrical forms have led to a radical caesura in classical drama. Even Friedrich Nietzsche's *the Twilight of the Idols* attacked Schiller as "the Moral-Trumpeter of Säckingen."<sup>1</sup> The power of Logos has been dislodged by the logic of the fragment.

No matter how you look at it – is it any wonder that in the late modern era a young actor finds it hard to connect to a figure like Joan of Arc? That she struggles with sentences such as:

Who? I? I hold the image of  
 A man in this pure heart of mine?  
 This heart can pulse with earthly love,  
 That Heaven fills with light divine?  
 I, who am my country's savior,  
 Almighty God's own warrior,  
 I for my country's foe dare yearn?  
 Do I dare to the chaste sun turn  
 And will not shame annihilate me?<sup>2</sup>

How can an actor today approach a text like this? How can she play and *embody* this text on stage? How can she speak this text by "heart"? How does Schiller's language feel 200 years later? How does it taste, what does

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1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 78. Unless noted otherwise, this is the translation of *Twilight of the Idols* cited.

2 Friedrich Schiller, *Maid of Orleans*, trans. Charles E. Passage (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing, 1967), Act IV, Scene I, 87.

it transport, what can we still read, what can we not read, what can we play, what can we not play? Ergo. How can an actor today speak Schiller's words without losing *tête, ventre et queue* (head, stomach and tail),<sup>3</sup> to cite Jean-Luc Nancy.

Do the roots of Hannah J.'s difficulties therefore lie in Schiller's classical dramatic text, which has long given up its place in the canon of theater? Would it be better to stage the play without its *dramatis personae* and their traditional dialogues, perhaps in a plane of language<sup>4</sup> or as an adaptation of a novel, allowing the creation of new free texts and forms? Does the text make her feel compelled to fulfill the traditional expectation of an "authentic" psychological interpretation? Does it make her feel bound to reproduce an illusion even when there is no need for this kind of portrayal? Or is she just insecure, overwhelmed by the pros and cons of all the different ways contemporary theater can deal with thematic and aesthetic problems? Are they the source of the intractable situation she is now stuck in?

No. Instinctively you shake your head. No, the trouble Hannah J. is having could arise in all theatrical forms. Her difficulties have another feel and even another smell.

The fact is, the girl is struggling on stage. She cannot find a way into the text, the role, the situation, or the emotions. Her words are made of paper, her body of clay. There is no flow, no groove, no *play*. Everything still feels constructed, fabricated, empty. It stumbles, falters, stagnates, and gets stuck. But why?

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3 "Platon veut que discours ait le corps bien constitué d'un grand animal, avec tête, ventre et queue. C'est pourquoi nous autres, bons et vieux platoniciens, nous savons et nous ne savons pas ce que c'est qu'un discours sans *queue ni tête* aphalle et acéphale. Nous savons: c'est du non-sens. Mais nous ne savons pas: nous ne savons pas quoi faire du 'non-sens', nous n'y voyons pas plus loin que le bout de sens – Plato wants discourse to have the well-built body of a large animal, with head, stomach and tail. So all of us, good Platonians of long standing, know and don't know what a discourse *lacking a head and tail* would be, acephalic and aphallic. We know it's non-sense, but we don't know what to make of this 'non-sense'; we don't see past the tip of sense." Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 12–13. (Italics in the original).

4 *Sprachfläche* – a term coined by Elfriede Jelinek to describe her work.

Schiller's language is certainly one barrier. It is just about the opposite of what we speak today – complex, intense and in rhyme. Its melodrama is alien and its syntax foreign: the unusually long, convoluted sentences, the alteration between prose and verse, the vocabulary, the choice of words. How can we speak such texts today? The very words shut us out. They do not want to leave our mouths. They pile up. For so long we have been accustomed to another kind of speaking, another kind of writing, another sentence structure, a different rhythm. Every era issues its own decrees. The media, not literature, now shape our use of language and set the paradigms. Texts are expected to be short and somehow cool, easygoing. Close to daily life. As distanced as possible, except for the teaser. Pointed, yes, ironic, yes, but still simple. By no means complex or complicated and certainly not melodramatic, whatever that might mean.

The second barrier that makes it so difficult for Hannah J. is our historical distance from the piece. There is a need to go back in time, already evident in the play's title, *The Maid of Orleans: A Romantic Tragedy*, and in the description of the main character, "sainted virgin."

Tragedy. Romantic. Sainted. Virgin. Warrior. God's warrior – all words we took leave of long ago, words that now make us apprehensive. We are no longer innocent enough for them. They sound too political. Automatically, the hairs in our well-attuned ears stand on end. Various warning bells start ringing. We feel more comfortable with Bertolt Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* in this regard. In contrast to the political systems envisioned by German idealism, in Brecht's version the word "saint" is legitimized through its proximity to the word "stockyards," reflecting the tremors of modernity, and the name shift from Joan of Arc to Johanna Dark evokes familiar terrain. "In my beginning is my end. [...] O dark, dark dark. They all go into the dark," writes T.S. Eliot in "East Coker."<sup>5</sup> That is something the citizens of postmodernity know well.

So how should a young actor who is just starting out, born long after 1968, find a way to embrace the particular events in and surrounding Schiller's Joan of Arc? Is that not by definition too much for her? Is there any way someone today could truly understand this phenomenon – God sending to a simple country girl a message that turns out to be

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5 T.S. Eliot, "East Coker" in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber, 1963), 196–204.

a weighty political obligation – understand it viscerally and practically, not just on a theoretical level? Can we today still truly empathize with a young woman whose budding love for a man makes her feel guilty for betraying her divine mission? Does this make sense today, in feminist times, after the death of God and the subject, in an era of discourse and deconstruction?

All of these issues are discussed at great length and worked on extensively during rehearsals, over and over again, but to no avail. Hannah J. makes no headway in rolling this stone of Sisyphus up the mountain of the script; she tortures herself and those present. Schiller's words in her mouth are cumbersome and clumsy. The language, like the feelings it evokes, remains stuck in sentimentality. It is unbearable, "the intolerable and dishonest 'seriousness' of public and official rhetoric."<sup>6</sup> It is theater as a museum, nothing to write home about. Nothing is made conclusive, nothing permeable, nothing porous. The emotions and words have no effect on the audience, no bearing on their situation. The words do not lead into the complex world of their meanings. Their sense is hermetically sealed, robbed of all dimensionality, even though every word can be understood acoustically. No door is opened to Joan of Arc's world. No girl is created to whom heaven was revealed in the words of the archangels and who, under the banner of God, liberated France from the English and aided the coronation of the French king – a girl who now, on coronation day, on the day of victory and celebration, tries desperately to understand why, ever since she caught the cataclysmic look of love in the eyes of a man, the solid ground of her divine mission has turned into an abyss. Deeply upset, Joan the shepherdess, "Almighty God's own warrior," as Schiller has his main character say about herself, believes she is guilty, sullied by this glance of love – until she revolts against it. That is pretty much what this scene is about.

Nothing seems to emerge from this stagnation, but neither is there any protest against Schiller – not against his dramatic concept of the theater, which she could reject as anachronistic, nor against his language, which she could try to subvert, nor against his old-fashioned, reactionary image of women, which she could counter with noncompliance. Those would

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6 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jurs-Mumby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 119.

be alternatives – a boycott by means of an aesthetic exploration, or by means of sociopolitical critique, since it is, in a way, an authoritative text with a humanistic educational ideal devoted to longing for the one and for the whole. But there is no trace of any of this. Instead, all we see is a drama student on stage, trying very hard. She has been trying hard for many rehearsals now. It is not pleasant to see this reflected in her face. The “no talent” verdict hangs in the air, that diffuse ghost that haunts so many beginners. Today, she seems to have reached the bottom. Rehearsals might be ended any second now. Why torture ourselves any longer?

## Turning point, peripeteia

Suddenly, without any warning or transition, the situation on stage changes.

The young actor’s figure grows – it becomes large, larger – it grows beyond its own actual size, suspends all perspective and – although she cannot lose her real size, her biological measurements – suddenly she fills the space; she penetrates the stage, feels it, fills it – until her limits burst, explode.

Simultaneously, a spell is cast, a temporal undertow – as if time had suddenly condensed, where only a second ago it was dragging on so laboriously. Boredom has disappeared completely now, as has dry uniformity. There is no longer a chronometer ticking out the seconds that march continuously straight ahead to the beat. Insubordinately they break rank, come together, become dense, denser, are torn apart and explode, like the space itself. Finally freed from linear order, time runs backward and forward simultaneously, jumps erratically. Past and future are both equally alive. It is as if time had been given wings.

The classroom has become still. No chairs move, and there are no hectic movements, no furtive glances toward the clock, no rustling of stealthy searches for chewing gum, a piece of candy, or some other trifle. All of that is forgotten. Not even a cell phone rings by mistake. All is silent now, everything hushed.

Irresistibly, the actor has gotten under the skin of everyone present. She is tangible now, close enough to touch. Her acting grabs and focuses

everyone's attention, but without relying on the authority of a mimetically created illusion. No imaginary fourth wall has been erected by surprise, making for a kind of voyeuristic peephole into someone's intimate sphere. Something else is going on here. A completely different form of perception is gaining ground, taking over the space. It kindles a concentration that abruptly pulls everyone and everything into its magnetic field – the exact same interstice into which the actor herself has accidentally fallen has all of a sudden caught the audience by surprise.

A zoom without a camera, performed by the naked eye? Or has *Alice in Wonderland* taken over the auditorium unawares? Yet no potion has been drunk, not by anyone. There is not a bottle in sight. Nothing labeled *Drink me!* in large clear letters, every sip of which carries inexplicable consequences.

Until just a second ago, the rehearsal was plodding, uninspired, and boring; it was unbearably obedient – a dead end. Everyone present was distracted, bored to distraction. Resignation was widespread. The actor on stage was and remained a nondescript, commonplace apparition with no charisma, not the least bit interesting. There was nothing to do about it. She obviously did not feel comfortable in her own body, and she projected this disagreeably to the audience. You literally lost sight of her, as if she were not there at all. The stage knows no pity. She looked lost and small, her face was cramped and disfigured from the exertion of playing a role, which forces emotions, creates them, holds them up, suppressing, undermining, manipulating, and interrupting her own impulses as enemies. All help offered came to nothing. Not knowing what else to do, everyone had been about to give up.

And now – abruptly – unexpectedly, with no warning – this transformation into the opposite.

All past misery is liquidated. The figure on stage no longer seems nondescript, her face no longer cramped, but clear, lively, diaphanous. All at once. Language and words open up. All strain is lifted. The words flow swiftly, playfully, as if they had just been formed. They reanimate the body from head to toe. Every emotion is visible, each thought effortless. There are no annoying grimaces, no forced theatricality. Nothing

is obtrusive. An easy intimacy awakens all the senses. An intimacy permeates the room and makes what is happening complex and multifaceted, almost tangible. At the same time, this closeness obscures the events, so that beyond sight, beyond hearing, beyond taste and touch and smell, their meanings elude us, revealing themselves only in their absence, in their silence. The event of the play evokes and revokes, hides and reveals, becomes a curly question mark that the audience cannot escape. Reversing inside and outside, its borders blur like time, or like the very space of the moment, without dissolving their differences into the diffuse.

Is this Joan's "forbidden" glance of love, about which Schiller has her say, while wrestling with herself: "It was with your glance that your crime began"?<sup>7</sup>

## Turn around

Right in the middle of this liberated expanding and gathering, in the middle of this dissolution of interior and exterior – in less than the blink of an eye – the next turn, the next wrinkle in time. This time it takes the form of a demolition, a completely unexpected interruption of play. Over. Finito. Done. Curtain! Abruptly, with no warning, unforeseeable. It happens just as starkly as before, with just as little transition.

Why does Hannah J. stop?

Why now, at this moment of all times!

Anger wells up. Anger and frustration. Why is she willfully destroying the moment, just when her acting is truly felicitous? It is beyond comprehension. Ridiculous. Before, one would have understood. There were plenty of times when she could have stopped, when perhaps she even should have stopped. Everyone would have been relieved. Everyone was hoping she would stop. But now? Now of all times, the second everything starts going well! Why?

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<sup>7</sup> Schiller, Act IV, 775.



For no apparent reason, the actor on stage bursts into tears. But they are not Joan's tears; rather, they belong to Hannah J. Clearly flustered, she cannot carry on, cannot continue.

Once again, the auditorium becomes still. It is a different kind of stillness, an awkward stillness due to an incomprehensible, obviously intimate act that would have been better without witnesses. It is a confusing act, unsettling and not at all sentimental. Embarrassment is in the air. Nobody really knows what to do. But no one laughs or makes one of their usual jokes. The tense stillness continues. After a while the tension is broken by a tear-stained, but clearly stubborn voice that obstinately declares, much to the surprise of all present: "If that's acting, I don't know if I want to become an actor!" First there is surprise, then irritation.

A bizarre reversal. A strange and unexpected turnaround. It turns our expectations topsy-turvy; it is incomprehensible, disconcerting. To go through all that agony, to resist becoming discouraged and giving up when the play is going so badly and then, of all times, to stop when the play begins to flow! To break the effortless stream of creativity that cannot be constructed or made, that needs to come of its own. And instead of being happy to have felt it, instead of riding the wave, the *kairos* of the moment, there is obvious resistance, resistance so strong that it leads to an interruption of play, so strong that it makes Hannah J. break into tears and speak out against her own desire to become an actor.

Incomprehensible, paradoxical. Why should *accomplishment* provoke aversion? It was not failure, but success that made Hannah J. cry so that she stopped, had to stop and wanted to stop. But why? Why just when it was working? Why when her acting was fortunate and no longer unfortunate? What was it that made her cry? What was it that came over her? What beset her, scared her, frightened her? What turned the pleasure of her accomplishment into discontent, her felicity into infelicity?

Discreetly, the class leaves the rehearsal, leaving the student and her teacher alone.

*i, mine*

*enough finito i've had enough i don't want to do this anymore this wasn't part of the deal are we being drugged here or what a play is play bullshit i have absolutely no desire anymore it's not cool or sexy or fun first it was frustrating really hard work and now my stomach is turning and my heart is pounding i don't understand what happened suddenly i'm not me anymore it's like someone's got the remote and I'm talking in tongues what are these words i'm suddenly thinking man does that sound stupid like i'm trying to be anyway what's wrong with me i'm not myself anymore ok that scares me makes me frantic as if i were me which i am what is it it's like it's kind of like i'm as if i'd been turned inside out*

*Nonsense! Outside is outside and inside is inside and I'm me. This is my head, these are my hands, these are my legs, this is my body. I can see it, I can touch it, this is me, three-dimensional, height times breadth times width, 120 pounds, 5'5" tall. Nothing has changed that. Nothing. Here I am, my name is Hannah J. Up to now I have always been able to rely on that. I can rely on that. My name is Hannah J. I've got my ID in my bag.*

*That's how it is.*



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